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Resistance to The Resistance To Poetry on The Resistance to Poetry

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RESISTANCE TO *THE RESISTANCE TO POETRY*
on *The Resistance to Poetry* by James Longenbach
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James Longenbach's previous book of criticism, *Modern Poetry after Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), opens by reworking Randall Jarrell's claim in the essay "The End of the Line" that "Romantic poetry holds in solution contradictory tendencies which, isolated and exaggerated in modernism, look startlingly opposed to each other and to the earlier stages of romanticism." Replacing the references to romanticism with modernism, and the reference to modernism with postmodernism, Longenbach begins his argument against the continued use of the "breakthrough narrative," a faulty critical construct based on an overly simple idea of a too-easy distinction between modernism and postmodernism, suggesting instead that we should think of postmodernism less as a break from modernism and more a continuation of modernism by other means.

While *Modern Poetry after Modernism* is an interesting and insightful book, it is also highly problematic. As has been argued elsewhere ("Some Thoughts on 'A Mind Thinking,'" *The Iowa Review*, 32.2), in that book, Longenbach establishes his own faulty critical construct, suggesting that much postmodern poetry should be considered the poetry of "a mind thinking." Perhaps too enchanted by the phrase "a mind thinking," Longenbach applies the phrase to, in hopes of actually describing, the work of various postmodern writers, such as Randall Jarrell, John Ashbery, Jorie Graham, and Robert Pinsky. However, the only way the phrase "a mind thinking" can really connect such different writers is if it actually serves to cover up the fact that, when they do in fact *think* in their writing, these writers often think in very different ways about very different things. Far from joining poets, considering their minds thinking largely differentiates them.

Though it seems to mostly try to join poets, Longenbach's work does differentiate some poets, but in a disappointingly traditional way: *Modern Poetry after Modernism* almost completely excludes discussion of Language poetry. The result of this odd exclusion—odd, since if any one group is writing modern poetry after modernism it is the Language poets—is that Longenbach's book, which hopes to develop a better, more accurate picture of postmodern American poetry in order to avoid what Longenbach calls "the next inevitable [critical] backlash," ends up reinforcing old divisions and maintaining mainstream value judgments.

Although *The Resistance to Poetry* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), Longenbach's new book of criticism, again offers some interesting insights and makes some subtle connections among various poems, it is largely the isolation and exaggeration of problematic features of *Modern Poetry after Modernism*. In *The Resistance to Poetry*, Longenbach largely tries to give substance to the catchphrase, "a mind thinking"; however, Longenbach's descriptions and definitions of the poetry of "a mind thinking" turn out to be disappointingly repetitive and reactionary, yet another conservative reinforcement of outmoded distinctions and evaluations. To the extent that *The Resistance to Poetry* marks any kind of advance in Longenbach's thinking since *Modern Poetry after Modernism*, it is as a massive critique of his own thinking; examined closely, *The Resistance to Poetry* makes clear that Longenbach should, and does, know better than to make the arguments he does.

Longenbach's tutelary spirit in *The Resistance to Poetry* is, again, Jarrell, though this time the quotation Longenbach, without acknowledgment, will base his thinking on is from Jarrell's essay, "The Obscurity of the Poet":

How our poetry got this way [too difficult]—how romanticism was purified and exaggerated and "corrected" into modernism; how poets carried all possible tendencies to their limits, with more than scientific zeal; how the dramatic monologue, which once had depended for its effect upon being a departure from the norm of poetry, now became in one form or another the norm...—is one of the most complicated and interesting of stories.

Explicitly, Longenbach's book, a collection of nine belletristic essays on a variety of topics, from line to disjunction to voice, is a defense of the obscurity of the poet, suggesting that the difficulty of poetry, so often complained about, actually is the source of poetry's strength. Longenbach states, "[T]he marginality of poetry is in many ways the source of its power, a power contingent on poetry's capacity to resist itself more strenuously than it is resisted by the culture at large." However, the book's implicit thesis is that poetry may be obscure as long as it seems a dramatic enactment of "a mind thinking." In a chapter called "The Other Hand," a chapter that includes some discussion of Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, the locus classicus for thinking about the dramatic monologue, Longenbach is consistently interested in poetry that he thinks creates "the sound of thinking in poetry—not the sound of finished thought but the sound of a mind alive in the syntactical process of discovering what it might be think-

ing." Additionally, Longenbach values a portion of a poem for the way its lines "dramatize the process of a mind discovering that what it sees is the product of what it thinks," and he wants to see in poems "the temporal process of transformation, the visceral process of thought."

Longenbach so greatly prizes the poem of a mind thinking that he subordinates the value of every other aspect of poetry to its ability to produce the effect of thinking. For example, in the chapter "The End of the Line," a discussion of the poetic line, Longenbach notes that while he has "for strategic purposes examined different poems that highlight different kinds of lines egregiously (end-stopped, parsing, annotating)," he explains that "the point is that most free verse cannot afford to confine itself to any one of these procedures," for lines of whatever kind, of all kinds, must be used to create "drama," to determine "our experience of a poem's temporal unfolding." In the chapter "The Spokenness of Poetry," Longenbach goes so far as to suggest that we can and should use the drama of "a mind thinking" to create a new tradition in poetry. Citing Robert Frost's dictum that "Everything written is as good as it is dramatic," and recognizing how this idea becomes analytical method in New Criticism which "take[s] for granted that all poetry involves a dramatic organization," Longenbach states, "The method leads us to prefer modern poems that announce themselves immediately as voice driven...and encourages us to look back at older poems that prefigure the preference...."

This tradition holds significant value for Longenbach. As opposed to poetry that Longenbach considers too easily utilitarian or didactic, descriptions Longenbach always employs contemptuously, and in fact does not want to talk about—in the opening paragraphs of his book, Longenbach makes clear that the poems he will discuss are not those of "epic narrative," or, in other words, "poems aspiring to a great deal of cultural weight"—Longenbach wants poetry with an almost mystical existential import. Citing Elizabeth Bishop, who states, "What one seems to want in art, in experiencing it...is the same thing that is necessary for its creation, a self-forgetful, perfectly useless concentration," Longenbach states that engaging with art is "a way of being alive," that the sense of uselessness art provides is, like dreaming or falling in love, "a freedom to forget ourselves so that we might discover we are different from ourselves." Elsewhere, Longenbach states that "great poems" don't "reflect our importance" but rather their language "returns our attention not to confirm what we know but to suggest that we might be different from ourselves," and, further, that "[r]ather than asking to be justified, poems ask us to exist."

Although Longenbach makes brief reference to Robert

Langbaum's important work, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*—a book that takes up the work Jarrell describes in "The Obscurity of the Poet," attempting to account for the rise of the dramatic monologue, and that in fact cites the Jarrell quote about the dramatic monologue—Longenbach's connections to that work are much deeper than his brief mention would suggest. Many of Longenbach's key ideas parallel and even echo Langbaum's. According to Langbaum, the rise of the dramatic monologue occurred as a result of falling away from oversimplified pre-Enlightenment notions of an all-too-easy split between perceiver and perceived, between knower and known. The dramatic monologue, in which "an observer moves through a series of intellectual oscillations toward a purpose of which he is himself at each point not aware," arose then because one could not write in a post-Enlightenment world a poem that could confidently connect sure *sententiae* about the way the world really is. Rather, the poem could show and—in order to be honest about the new rifts appearing between self and world, and to save significant freedom for the self in a new, Newtonian world of iron-clad, chain-link cause-and-effect—really *had to* show the mind as an active agent in the world, participating in the making of meaning. Langbaum is absolutely clear on these points. In a formula Langbaum repeats in various ways throughout his book, the dramatic monologue, "the new kind of lyric in which the poet discovers his idea through a dialectical interchange with the external world," is new in that it is not "the traditional lyric in which the poet sets forth his already formulated idea either epigrammatically or logically...." And this new kind of poem has a new kind of significance. It doesn't teach lessons; its importance is "existential rather than moral." According to Langbaum, dramatic monologues "...all mean the same thing—the greatest possible surge of life."

Unlike Longenbach, though, Langbaum does not suggest a tradition but very much works with a tradition, making a meaning for the canonical tradition of the dramatic monologue that might help readers to see that tradition in new ways. Responding to one critic, who says of Robert Browning's dramatic monologue, "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," that it is just too disconnected, too "dream-like and...disjointed," that it lacks "a definite moral," and so seems "a simple work of fancy, built up of picturesque impressions which have, separately or collectively, produced themselves in the author's mind," Langbaum states, rightly, that now, after familiarizing oneself with his insights, one can read the poem with the "advantage" of his work's "particular context," noting that "it is one thing to dismiss the poem

as simply an experience, and another to apply to it the systematic concept of a poetry of experience—to find through a comparison of it with other dramatic monologues...that it has a rationale in its irrationality and an order in its disorder."

Though Langbaum's adherence to a preestablished canon might seem a bit conservative, in actuality it is more liberal and critical than Longenbach's subtly, though ultimately extremely, conservative work. Langbaum employs his work to create new critical distinctions; for example, he uses his insights to critique canonical authors. Langbaum recognizes, for example, that Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence" and Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" are dramatizations of experiences while "Ode to Duty" and "Ode on Melancholy" are not. Thus, he clearly recognizes that individual poets, even great poets, often work in different modes, and are capable of succeeding *or not* at making a poem comparable to that of "a mind thinking." Longenbach, however, is unable or unwilling to make such judgments and evaluations of individual poets and especially established, "great" poets—even though Longenbach's work, unlike Langbaum's, demands such evaluations.

Longenbach's relationship with a canon should be much more involved than Langbaum's because unlike Langbaum's work, which is largely descriptive, Longenbach's work is, in large part, prescriptive. Citing Jarrell, who states, in "The End of the Line," "Today, for the poet, there is an embarrassment of choices: poets can choose—do choose—to write anything from surrealism to imitations of Robert Bridges" and Auden, who states that in order to honor the "subjective life," we "must accept strange juxtapositions of imagery, singular associations of ideas," Longenbach knows that today a poet can do anything she wants with her poetry. And yet, agreeing with Auden who states elsewhere that the danger of such disjunction is the confusion of "authentic non-logical relations which arouse wonder with accidental ones which arouse mere surprise and in the end fatigue," Longenbach does believe some poetry is better than others. Thus, Longenbach must argue which poems seduce properly or, to borrow a phrase from Wallace Stevens that Longenbach borrows, which poems resist the intelligence almost successfully rather than too successfully. Thus, Longenbach should have to establish a canon, a tradition. He should have to say what poems by Language poets such as Bob Perelman and Lyn Hejinian are in the tradition. He should have to say what poems by somewhat lesser-known poets, such as J.H. Prynne and Frederick Seidel, are in. He should have to say what poems by younger poets, such as Mark Levine, Claudia Rankine, D.A. Powell,

Joshua Clover, Jeff Clark, Jennifer Moxley, Spenser Short, Chelsey Minnis, Matt Rohrer, Olena Kalytiak Davis, poets who seem very interested in synthesizing Language techniques and confessional ends, are in and which others seem "a simple work of fancy, built up of picturesque impressions...produced ...in the author's mind."

But he doesn't, and instead of establishing a tradition, Longenbach actually falls back on a distinction he himself argues is bogus: the distinction between Language poetry and more mainstream poetry. This is clear in Longenbach's work on disjunction. In the chapter "Forms of Disjunction," Longenbach recognizes two forms of disjunction: dry and wet. While there are a few moments in the chapter when Longenbach allows that there is some overlap between the two forms of disjunction, that each may have some benefits, it is clear that dry disjunction—a Poundian disjunction with a "didactic imperative" that is practiced by a poet like Rosemarie Waldrop (30-1)—is bad, and wet disjunction—an Eliotic disjunction practiced by poets like Jorie Graham, John Ashbery, and John Koethe that evokes "a rivetingly engaged act of speaking" and, thus, can exude the existential power necessary to "take us to different places at the same time" and to leave us "feeling that we occupy different registers of consciousness at the same time"—is good.

Making such a distinction, though, is farcical; it states only that poetry in the Pound tradition—read: Language poetry—is bad, while other work is good. Such an assessment, though always contestable, is hardly new. And yet Longenbach keeps making this unnecessary distinction and assessment even though he himself wants to be rid of it. Particularly telling and disappointing is that even when he hopes to show that there is no significant difference between Language poetry and other traditions and schools, Longenbach inevitably ends up valorizing the non-Language poetry. The chapter "Song and Story," for example, begins with extended quotations from two of Language poet Charles Bernstein's poems—one that is problematically "all story" and another that is problematically "all song"—but ends by allowing Ellen Bryant Voigt, a poet who is definitely in the Eliotic line—her poem under discussion opens with a line that, according to Longenbach, "dramatiz[es] the...process of recording experience"—to occupy the space of Language poetry as she is one who "would agree with Bernstein that no good poem allows words to become transparent" rather than examining any other Bernstein poem, even though Longenbach notes that "most of Bernstein's poems dwell in a middle ground where the semantic power of language is alternately bolstered and resisted by the physical seduction of sound...."

The reconfiguration of the space of Language poetry is generally an important endeavor; the distinction between Language poetry and the mainstream, the distinction between what Bernstein calls anti-absorptive, or disruptive, writing and absorptive, or transparent, writing is faulty, and it is important to begin asking serious questions about what, if anything, really differentiates Language poetry from other poetry. Longenbach, though, does a botched job of exploring this distinction, merely giving lip service to the Language poets while installing more mainstream poets—such as Louise Gluck, a featured poet, who "exists in the difficult middle"—into this supposed middle ground. Unlike Langbaum, who can use his thinking to see the differences in one poet's work, Longenbach shores up poets and schools, paradoxically, the very distinctions he seems so keen to be rid of.

This continuation of old, problematic distinctions is not merely the unfortunate side-effect of using some poorly chosen examples. Longenbach, it seems, really is against potentially disruptive thinking, against, for example, the kind of theory that interests the minds of Language poets. Most noticeably, Longenbach suggests in different ways that readers should once again simply accept the Romantic ideology. The Romantic ideology, a way of thinking over two centuries old, is the illusion that the mind can dwell outside of history, that through poetry one can gain a vantage on contingency. Though this concept is over twenty years old, and has been thoroughly examined and critiqued in Jerome McGann's very good book, *The Romantic Ideology*, Longenbach employs the Romantic ideology unselfconsciously. Thus, at the conclusion of a discussion of John Koethe's "The Constructor," Longenbach can conclude confidently: "The soul sliding out of chaos. A mood of absolute bewilderment. An angel whispering *Come with me*. Who would have thought that 'The Constructor,' one of the most relentlessly disillusioned poems ever written, could conclude by finding solace in such beautiful, time-honored nonsense?" An informed, savvy reader would have expected this; finding solace from disillusionment in nonsense is one good way of describing the Romantic ideology. An informed, savvy reader also would be able to come up with some responses to Longenbach's rhetorical question pretty easily: well, perhaps—though he is only mostly (or, as Longenbach might claim, *merely*) a poet of epic narrative—Byron, perhaps—though he is merely a theorist—Karl Marx, and definitely—another theorist—Jerome McGann.

In the chapter "Leaving Things Out," Longenbach obviously assumes his readership—perhaps filled with an artful, Bishop-like self-forgetfulness—will go along with him unquestioningly. In part of this

chapter, Longenbach, discussing Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," argues against theorists, such as McGann and Marjorie Levinson, who consider "Tintern Abbey" a key container for and conveyor of Romantic ideology. In important and challenging works, McGann and Levinson note that the poem works, that it can attain its spiritual insight, only by a cover-up, by an avoidance of the real world situation of the poem, by transforming the site of the poem, the Wye River valley, from a wasted landscape of the industrial revolution and the hang-out for its homeless poor that it really was into a much more prettified, romanticized landscape. However, according to Longenbach's one paragraph on the subject, the problem with these criticisms is that they don't respect enough the "complex relationship" language has to what it represents. Longenbach largely hopes and assumes his readership simply will agree with his facile representation and assessment of the long, engaged debates about "Tintern Abbey." But Longenbach shouldn't convince; he doesn't argue in-depth enough to convince anyone with the least doubts about his position. In fact, it is hard to imagine Longenbach himself is convinced by his own arguments, for it is not only Levinson and McGann who have troubles with this poem; some great poets—to turn Longenbach's technique against him—too, have troubles with this poem, and they express their disagreement—even though Longenbach states that "we read a poem for its manner rather than its matter"—in great poems. Wordsworth himself came to dislike the poem, and he critiques its salvation-through-memory scheme in his poem, "Peele Castle." Marianne Moore critiques the overall structure and style of "Tintern Abbey," in her poem, "A Grave," an argument against the hyper-masculine nature of the thinking in such poems.

Apart from whether or not he is right or wrong about "Tintern Abbey," Longenbach seems very quick to defend this embattled cultural touchstone. Disappointingly, with the breeziness of his writing, with its lack of argument, Longenbach does not so much convince anyone of the value of a touchstone like Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" but instead assumes that value, basing his argument on it. This is Longenbach's deep conservatism, a conservatism he either won't admit to or else doesn't see as he moves discussions from highly technical remarks to highly spiritual speculations using established, mainstream authors to make and validate these moves rather than accepting the responsibility of criticism, of having to come right out and say that Language poets stink and Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," despite the theory and the poetry to the contrary, still is powerful and persuasive. Unlike Langbaum, Longenbach won't introduce a critique of the

canonical or the mainstream—even though he is equipped to do so.

Longenbach is in possession of a potentially very helpful, insightful, incisive tool for thinking about the worth of poems. In the chapter "Composed Wonder," Longenbach suggests that the poem should, in the end, feel both structured and surprising, inevitable and unexpected. Longenbach is amazed, for example, by the end of Anthony Hecht's poem, "It Out-Herods Herod. Pray You, Avoid It'," a poem that concludes in a way which "[n]othing...prepares us for" and at the same time seems "inevitable." This standard is hinted at elsewhere in the book. Longenbach employs the language of structured surprise to express his admiration for one of the oldest poems in the English language, "Western Wind." About that poem—which reads, "Western wind, when will thou blow, / The small rain down can rain? / Christ, if my lover were in my arms / And I in my bed again!"—Longenbach states, "The expostulation—Christ!—marks the place where the poem breaks open, releasing an emotion that is both unpredictable and, at least in retrospect, logical."

The standard of, the demand for, structured surprise has much potential. It contributes something new and specific to talk of poetry, and, for Longenbach, whose views are so often similar to Langbaum's, it begins to differentiate his thinking from his predecessor's which states that the structure of the dramatic monologue is, essentially, circular. Structured surprise also is radical. It can be used to draw party lines in new ways. Putting all weight and pressure on the poem, it doesn't make judgments according to poets or schools. Wet disjunction might create structured surprise, but so might dry. Ashbery might have twenty poems that do this, but so might a lesser-known poet—and such a fact should encourage us to get to know those works of that lesser-known poet. In fact, what Longenbach says of Bishop's expectation that art lead to "perfectly useless concentration," that it "makes the hard work of art seem simultaneously rare and available to everyone," can also be said of structured surprise. Additionally, just as the poetry of a mind thinking has a greater, symbolic, existential meaning, so might the poetry of structured surprise; the poem of structured surprise is a constantly renewed promise that what begins one way may, with some design and some luck, turn out an enchanting, devastatingly stunning new way; it is further crucial evidence that one is justified in the hope for human-made miracles.

The problems with Longenbach's use of structured surprise is that it is both inadequate—it comes into focus only in the book's final chapter—and inconsistent. If there are times when one can sense Longenbach is hinting at this demand, there are also many times when

he disregards it. Longenbach often simply accepts failure from supposedly great poets. He states, "In any attempt to 'communicate impassioned feelings,' said Wordsworth in a note to one of the lyrical ballads, we 'find a consciousness of the inadequateness of our own powers, or the deficiencies of language.' That's what we want to hear." Of course, plenty of poems "find" inadequacy and deficiency but they should be considered great not because they're written by a supposedly great poet but only if by finding inadequacy they earn surprise for readers. Additionally, while poems may have "the expectation of meaningfulness," Longenbach allows that that expectation "thrills because it might be as easily thwarted as fulfilled." The demand of structured surprise would simply add that if that expectation was simply thwarted or simply fulfilled, then the poem is not likely to be a good poem, that a good poem demands its expectation be both thwarted *and* fulfilled, that its fulfillment be connected *and* new.

By allowing certain supposedly great poems to be inadequate and still be great, Longenbach is little different from Charles Bernstein who states, in his essay "State of the Art," that he would rather have failed poems, poems done the supposedly "wrong way," than poems like those in the mainstream that repeat their predictable findings over and over. The difference though is that if Bernstein's adherence to Language poetry no matter what makes him an avant-garde ideologue, then Longenbach's adherence to cultural touchstones and mainstream successes make him little more than a member of the cultural clerisy. Because he is unwilling to take up the responsibility of active, engaged, specific, and even disruptive criticism, because he is unwilling to think in new ways about different work, Longenbach ends up writing a book that mostly repeats and, indeed, is based on, familiar mainstream distinctions. *The Resistance to Poetry*, if it is at all surprising, is mostly surprisingly flawed.